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MERCHANT OF VENICE. LITERATURE CURRICULUM III, TEACHER VERSION.

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REPORT NUMBER CRP-H-149-45
REPORT NUMBER BR-5-0366-45
EDRS PRICE MF-$0.09 HC-$1.16 29P.

DESCRIPTORS- *CURRICULUM GUIDES, *TEACHING GUIDES, GRADE 9, *LITERATURE GUIDES, *ENGLISH LITERATURE, LITERATURE PROGRAMS, SECONDARY EDUCATION, CURRICULUM RESEARCH, INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS, *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, EUGENE, PROJECT ENGLISH, NEW GRAMMAR, SHAKESPEARE

THIS TEACHING GUIDE ON "THE MERCHANT OF VENICE" WAS PREPARED FOR USE IN A NINTH-GRADE LITERATURE CURRICULUM. THE PURPOSE OF THE GUIDE WAS TO ILLUMINATE THE PLAY AS A WHOLE, AND TO SUGGEST TO THE TEACHER SOME USEFUL PRINCIPLES FOR FRAMING QUESTIONS AND GUIDING DISCUSSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM. THE GUIDE WAS NOT TO BE USED, HOWEVER, AS A BASE FOR PREPARING A LECTURE OR A SERIES OF LECTURES. TEACHERS WERE EXPECTED TO USE THE GUIDE TO FACILITATE INTELLIGENT READING AND INTERPRETATION AND TO STIMULATE INTEREST IN THE PLAY AND ITS CONTENT. THE CORRESPONDING STUDENT GUIDE IS ED 010 815. RELATED REPORTS ARE ED 010 129 THROUGH ED 010 160 AND ED 010 803 THROUGH ED 010 832. (JH)

OREGON CURRICULUM STUDY CENTER

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MERCHANT OF VENICE.

Literature Curriculum III
Teacher Version

The project reported herein was supported through the Cooperative Research Program of the Office of Education, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

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SHAKESPEARE: THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Teacher Version

1. Shakespeare: Grades 9-12

Our guiding aim in the six-year English program is to shape it in such a way that it will have so far as possible a coherent structure which in general outline will be simple and apparent enough to provide both teachers and students with a sense of continuity and development. The principle of "spiraling," the continuing emphasis on some of the simple technical aspects of literature, the selection of at least part of our material according to certain thematic relationships (journey, etc.), are some of the means designed to further these ends. Recurrent emphasis upon kinds or genres --myth, legend, traditional and art ballad, novel, play, etc.--also serves the purpose. So does frequent return to certain authors, selected for special attention for substantive as well as formal reasons. The work of Mark Twain, for instance, in addition to the merit of much of it as literature, is a polished reflector in which we can so clearly see our own image, the American image, that it contributes greatly to the slow process of national self-understanding. Regular returns to the single writer also add to the pleasure and satisfaction of "possessing" a work, the perhaps deeper satisfaction of communion with an author, a growing sense of his coherence but his variety too, a feeling eventually of standing in intimate relationship with him. He is with us, a vivid member of the community in which we live.

There are so many reasons for the selection of Shakespeare for primary emphasis in such a continuing program that it is not possible to point to all of them; a brief sample must serve. His pre-eminence in the world of English letters is clear and absolute. He is to us what Goethe is to Germany, Dante to Italy. Such authors in a way of speaking act as cultural "binders"; they hold us together; they lead us to a common vision of our humanity, giving us, as we have already suggested, a deeper sense of community. It is partly, and importantly, linguistic in nature. The work of Shakespeare was a "language experiment," to use the phrase Whitman applied to his own work as a poet. In his coinages, imagery, syntax, and idiomatic usages, he effected a revolution, gave us almost a new tongue: (early) modern English (see "Early Modern English -- the Language of Shakespeare," Teacher and Student Versions). He is seminal. His work was a process of creative definition: it is still the source of the meanings we associate with such words as "comedy," "romance," "tragedy." In the Roman plays and the English chronicles he domesticated unruly history for the orderly uses of literature. With increasing subtlety and complexity he shows us in concrete terms how kingdoms both corrupt men and are necessary to them, and how men destroy and then find it necessary to rebuild kingdoms. He is, in other words, a great original source of the modern political imagination. It goes beyond that: his work is still a large part of what we know and feel about the human predicament. His poetic development was also a sharp thrust forward, in diction,

in the handling of the verse line, in the shocking boldness of his imagery. So some of the obvious "reasons" present themselves.

It must be said immediately, however, that the study of a Shakespearian play in each of the last four years of the public school program may be understood as a calculated risk. The risk is the old one, represented in the series: failure of understanding / boredom / resistance / permanent disaffection: a tragic reversal of the good intention. Our challenge is to find ways of negating the negation, to make it go: understanding / awakening of interest / enjoyment / permanent commitment. Success will require imagination, patience, and above all tact. Tact. Do not press too hard. Do not demand reverence (think of all those paying customer in the pit of the Globe), nor feel it necessary to show it (enthusiasm, of course, is another matter). Be business-like: the first step is understanding. Stay close to the text. There will be difficult problems of interpretation for which often the notes provide no real solution. Don't be afraid of saying, "I am not sure," indeed, "I do not know." Take comfort in T. S. Eliot's cool observation: "About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it is probable what we can never be right."*

* He continues: "and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong." (Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca")

Encourage, then argument. Argument is comforting, it is a sign of life.

We begin the four-year sequence in the ninth grade with The Merchant of Venice. It is an early play, originally produced sometime before 1598, thus belonging to a group which includes A Midsummer Night's Dream and Romeo and Juliet. The recommended text is that of "The Folger Library General Reader's Shakespeare," published by the Washington Square Press. The introductory material, especially the brief discussion of the play (pp. vii-xiv) and "The Shakespearian Theater" (pp. xxvi-xxxiii), should be given close attention.

2. The Merchant of Venice: Some Reasons for Its Selection

It does not quite go without saying that the young reader's experience with Shakespeare should begin with one of the comedies. It is a proposition that seems sound on the face of it, simply because the springtime world of comic fancy ("A day in April never came so sweet") must surely be more congenial to youth than the dark winter of the tragic vision. The comedies themselves, however, have their own peculiar difficulties. Their plots, for instance, are often actually more complex in structure (and therefore more bewildering on first reading) than those of the tragedies (compare in this respect A Midsummer Night's Dream with Julius Caesar or Macbeth). In the second place, the comic sense itself often seems almost hopelessly a thing of time and place, not to be marked for export: Mark Twain's description of the "Washoe Zephyr" would have fallen flat in the Globe, and we seldom respond with any real spontaneity to the motif of the mixup of twins or the elaborate word-play of Shakespeare's clowns and courtiers. There is perhaps more mystery in our laughter than in our pity and terror. The old joke can be explained,

but it remains an old joke; the charge is dead, and the professor's laughter rings hollow in the classroom.

There are, however, good reasons for beginning an exploration of the Shakespearian terrain with the "comedy" called The Merchant of Venice. First of all, and negatively, its effects depend less than do those of some of the other comedies upon the faded pun and the stupefying riot of slapstick. "Launcelot Gobbo, a clown, servant to Shylock," is only a minor nuisance. The play's poetic idiom is on the whole simple and straightforward, relatively free of the elaborate artifice of the Elizabethan conceit, but issuing finally in the soaring lyricism of the last act. The interweaving of plots and motives is unusually skillful, to be grasped with little difficulty and yet complex enough to be of great structural interest, another occasion for the continuing concern with form. The work is also characteristic of the Shakespearian vision both comic and tragic, in the conflict in its thematic structure of the contradictory impulses, love and hate. The handling of the sinister figure of Shylock provides an early although somewhat uncertain example of the playwright's long roster of sympathetic villains. Shylock is sinister in a second sense: his conception is rooted in the prejudice of a whole culture, extending through centuries. From the vantage point of his furious isolation he delivers its indictment. He is also great theater. For the actor no other role in the play will do. Supreme examples also of good theater are the business of the riddling caskets and the great courtroom combat of Act IV.

Finally, the play raises instructive questions about dramatic kind, about genre. What does it mean to say that The Merchant of Venice is a "comedy"? What is it really? The question is not academic. It is a matter of settling at the start how we should take it. The problem was faced earlier with Mark Twain's Roughing It.

3. The Merchant of Venice: What Is It?

Is it, in the terms of Polonius, "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited"?

In Chaucer's time "comedy" meant simply a narrative which traced a progress from adversity or something like it to prosperity. All's well if it ends well. Hence the "Comedy" of Dante, which embraces the cruel agonies of hell and purgatory, mysteriously authorized by "Primal Love." "Comedy" was not necessarily an occasion for laughter. Neither, on the medieval stage, did the serious or sublime subject exclude it: in the Second Shepherds' Play the birth of Christ must await the conclusion of the long boisterous business of Mak the sheep-stealer and the grotesque subterfuge of the cradle. Both the old usage of the word and the practice of the old stage survive in the usages and practices of the Elizabethans, who generally had less respect for precise categories than Professor Polonius. "Comedy" was a convenient tag for a play that ended in prosperity: a term wide as a church door if not so deep as a well, 'twould serve; and Shakespearian practice defied all rules of consistency of tone. Wit and the comedy of the grotesque are integral elements in the great tragedies, and the best comedies are suspended

perilously on the edge of the abyss. Comedies and tragedies contemplate the same themes, the same human issues: the difference is in the perspective and the mood: "point of view".

"Comedy" then will serve for The Merchant of Venice. "Romance" would do as well, and perhaps a little better. The people of the play inhabit a fantasy world, a dream world as surely as that of the Midsummer Night. It "is a fairy tale," Harley Granville-Barker says bluntly. "There is no more reality in Shylock's bond [we shall see about that] and the Lord of Belmont's will than in Jack and the Beanstalk." Image and allusion support the contention, generate the fairy atmosphere. The "sunny locks" of Portia "Hang on her temples like a golden fleece. . . And many Jasons come in quest of her." If the plot complications seem to spring from motives all-too-human, their solution is effected by pure magic. Shylock the Ogre, given an opening by insolvent love, thrusts his malevolent way into the fairy world of youth and passion and, a counter-passion, squats there finally, whetting his knife on his boot-sole. The fairy world must be purged of the Ogre before the divine harmony of the moon-drenched last act can ring out pure and loud. That can be done only by the courtroom magic of Portia, goddess of love and mercy. At the end the harsh discord threatened by Shylock is remembered only in the mock quarrel over the rings, which themselves have magic qualities, binding the lovers together forever and forever. The feminine principle reigns.

> "Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way
> Of starved people."

"Divine" comedy indeed.

Take this as a working hypothesis. Present it only as an hypothesis, which must then be tested by examination of the play itself. Is this indeed its quality, its effect?

Turn, then, to the play's subject, considered in its double aspect of thematic content and dramatic narrative. Note in passing that they are hardly separable from the play's form.

4. Form: Thematic Structure

The Merchant of Venice can be made the occasion for going a little more deeply into the problem of Form and its close organic relationship to such things as theme, character, setting, and narrative development. The "Student Version" (Part 3: Form) shows briefly how the form may be approached in terms of the five-act convention ("external form") or in terms of theme, conflict and contrast, underlying meaning ("internal form"). The latter approach is favored. The basic theme can be defined as conflict--in abstract terms, conflict between love (mercy) and hate (revenge); these abstract ideas are embodied in character (Portia-Shylock); and places (Belmont-Venice). The basic structure, the repeated scenic transitions from Venice to Belmont and back again, is determined by the basic theme. Hence "thematic structure."

A diagrammatic arrangement may be helpful as a guide.

Thus:

THEMES	PLOTS
THEME Love: Harmony PLACE Belmont (The Fairy World)	A. Bassanio and the Winning of Portia Obstacles: His Insolvency (Antonio, Shylock) Test of the Caskets (Rival Suitors: Morocco --Gold; Arragon--Silver)
	B. Gratiano-Nerissa: Love by Contagion
	C. Lorenzo-Jessica: Love as Theft
COUNTER-THEME Revenge: Discord PLACE Venice: the Rialto (World of Commerce and Law)	D. Shylock: Religious Persecution Bassanio's Insolvency Friendship Motif: Antonio-Bassanio
"COMIC" RESOLUTION	E. Triumph of Portia: Harmony: Belmont Preserved

The places, Venice and (not to be found on any map) Belmont, are important as thematic place-symbols set in opposition to each other. Venice (Othello "steals" <u>his</u> bride there, as does Lorenzo in this play) and its commercial district the Rialto represent a "real" world of money-lending and usury and risky business ventures in trade and transport. It is necessarily legalistic, since the law of contracts is essential to all business practices (see Antonio's speech at the end of Act III, Scene 3). The glory of the law is its impersonality, and in civilized societies even rulers must be subject to its rule, as is the Duke of Venice. Law is the civilized man's fate. "Is <u>that</u> the law?" asks Shylock incredulously, stunned by the legal maneuver of Portia. It <u>is</u>, it is so fated, and there is no escape for him, just as, if he had laid his plot more shrewdly, there would have been none for Antonio. To this extent, Venice is the real world, dominated by the profit motive subject only to the law of contracts. And the profit motive may taint everything. Even Bassanio may seem suspect: "In Belmont is a lady <u>richly</u> <u>left</u>; And she is fair. . ." <u>And</u> she is fair. It is an interesting exercise in the distribution of emphasis. It may have been played for laughs in the Globe.

The glory of the law is its impersonality; and yet the impersonality of the law is also its curse. True equity demands a law, a justice, that is enlightened and guided by the quality of mercy. In the play, this issues from Belmont, from the hospitable estate of Portia, daughter of the deceased Duke. Yet this world too is for a while under the shadow of a law, but a law irrational, like all the laws and prohibitions that obtain in fairy worlds: the will of the dead father, prescribing the method for the selection of his daughter's husband. "O me," the little lady sighs, thinking of it, "the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father." This too, the "lott'ry" of her "destiny," is fate. Nerissa is confident that it will prove just: the chest of her deliverance "will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love." Such confidence is faith, faith in mystery, in magic, in love. It is "unreasonable," but that is the point: for love in the Shakespearian world, and especially in the world of the tragedies, is a mystery in almost the Christian sense, transcendent of mere reason. The law of Venice is "reasonable": business demands it. The law of Belmont is "unreasonable": the rule of love. They are in thematic conflict: matter vs. spirit.

Nerissa's faith is confirmed. Portia is saved for love, which is charity, which is also mercy. She is then qualified by the lottery of the caskets to carry the magic of Belmont into the legal world of Venice, ironically disguised of course in the costume of "a young and learned doctor" of the law, Venice's law: spirit masked as matter, in order, if need be, to play matter's game. The issue of course is never really in doubt, for this is a "comedy": <u>The Merchant of Venice, or, The Triumph of Belmont</u>.

The places then are symbols, thematic symbols.

5. Subject as Dramatic Narrative

The narrative plays back and forth between the two places, Venice and Belmont. Bassanio the Venetian would enter the competition for the hand of Portia, but the journey to Belmont and the courtship gifts require money, and he is insolvent: broke. Worse than that, he is already in debt (we find later) to his friend and kinsman Antonio, the melancholy merchant. He makes the appeal nevertheless, only to find that Antonio is richer in credit than in cash; but richer in loyalty to his friend than in either cash or credit. So, he says,

> "Try what my credit can in Venice do;
> That shall be racked even to the uttermost
> To furnish thee to Belmont, to fair Portia."

<u>Venetian finance and Belmont's "fair Portia" are thus at the start linked in unholy alliance, and work together as motives of the plot.</u>

Antonio's Venetian credit propels Bassanio, whose motive is love, into the hands of the professional money-lender Shylock, whose motive is hate, and who as Jew was "privileged" by the custom and law of the

time to charge interest (usury) upon loans. Gratiano's appeal to Shylock for the loan of three thousand ducats, to be guaranteed by Antonio, is granted: "Antonio is a good man"--that is, his credit is good, he is a safe risk. But Antonio's motive of friendship and Bassanio's of love are here ironically furthered by the opposite motive, hate: the thirst for revenge, which has its own motive--

> "If I can catch him once upon the hip,
> I will feed fat that ancient grudge I bear him."

Shylock will, however, be "kind," will

> "Forget the shames that you have stained me with,
> Supply your present wants, and take no doit (no penny)
> Of usance (interest) for my moneys."

Instead, for a joke, "in a merry sport," he will contract for a three-months loan, substituting for interest a penalty, in case of failure to pay, of "an equal (exact) pound/ Of yourfair flesh, to be cut off and taken/ In what part of your body pleaseth me." The word "equal," exact, is a slip, and important, to be made clear when Portia turns the tables in Act IV. Now it seems only absurd, an unexpected turn of wit in the "kind" usurer. For in any reasonable world, as Shylock says,

> "A pound of a man's flesh taken from a man
> Is not so estimable, profitable neither,
> As flesh of muttons, beefs,or goats."

But the world of this play is not "reasonable," except perhaps for the Venetian law of contract. The narrative, then, begins in this.

The dominant love-story of Bassanio and Portia has its first sub-parallel in the love of Lorenzo and Shylock's daughter Jessica. They introduce a theme used frequently by Shakespeare: youthful love as a source of conflict between child and parent: one great example is the outrage felt by the Venetian Brabantio, the father of Desdemona, when he is made aware of his daughter's love for Othello. Union and division, division and union--their rhythmic interplay is central in the Shakespearian world. Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo (II-6), daughter-theft coupled with the daughter's theft of jewels and ducats, must be felt by Shylock as the final intolerable blow delivered by his traditional persecutors; it intensifies his motive of revenge. Solanio understands and fears it:

> "Let good Antonio look he keep his day (the term of his bond).
> Or he shall pay for this."

Bassanio's love, then, puts Antonio under the power of Shylock; the second love, that of Jessica and Lorenzo, makes it more sure that the power will be used. So the two love stories are closely linked thematically and as motives in the play's dramatic structure.

In Belmont, meanwhile, the still unrelated story of Portia and the contest of the caskets has begun. Unrelated, that is, except through

scene juxtaposition: the trial, for instance, of the first suitor, the Prince of Morocco, is flanked in the play's scenic arrangement by the two Venetian scenes, the elopement of Jessica (II-6) and Shylock's anguish as reported by Salanio (II-8):

> "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
> Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!"

Is the speech amusing or heartbreaking? Remember the golden casket that gleams in the intervening scene.

The casket scenes are boldly different in theatrical style from the scenes that frame them. They are highly formal, ritualistic, with the enigmatic chests themselves dominating the stage. The choice itself in each scene is preceded by a long stately speech by the amorous contestant, developing the ground for his decision. Morocco and Arragon (II-9) fail, and Arragon's departure is followed immediately by the announcement of Bassanio's approach, his way prepared by his emissary, his "ambassador of love"--

> "A day in April never came so sweet
> To show how costly summer was at hand."

The two worlds of Venice and Belmont are at last about to merge, thanks to Bassanio's love, thanks to Antonio's loyalty, and thanks to Shylock's motive of revenge: he after all is paying the bill for Bassanio's expensive campaign.

Act III, Scene 2, is central in the play's structure; at its end Belmont and Venice are firmly and, as it seems, fatally linked. At its beginning Bassanio enters the lists to the sound of music, the first time, significantly, it is heard in the play: unlike the others, Bassanio is given the benefit of its magical support. Portia stands waiting, fearful, thinking of herself as a sacrificial victim. The song begins--

> "Tell me where is fancy bred,
> Or in the heart, or in the head"--

a clue perhaps to the reason for the failures of Morocco and Arragon, whose trial speeches are long exercises in the logic of the head. Bassanio, opting for lead (helped perhaps by the rhyme of the song, it has been suggested), passes the test. The union is sealed with kiss and ring, and Gratiano, caught in the contagion of such magic, reveals his sudden love for Nerissa, explaining it to Bassanio:

> "Your fortune stood upon the caskets there,
> And so did mine too, as the matter falls."

Then, as if irresistibly drawn there by the same magnetism, Lorenzo and Jessica arrive: another plot thread is gathered in from Venice. All the lovers are now in their proper world. Immediately, however, that world is threatened by the Ogre: with Lorenzo and Jessica has come

Salerio with Antonio's letter, and Gratiano's triumphant "We are the Jasons, we have won the Fleece," is countered swiftly (time only for Salerio's sad pun on "fleece" and "fleets") by Bassanio's cry,

> "O sweet Portia,
> Here are a few of the unpleasant'st words
> That ever blotted paper."

Antonio's ventures have all failed, the three months' term of the bond has expired (somewhat mysteriously, it must seem), and Shylock will, and the law must, claim Antonio's life. The promise of triumphant love is thwarted, and at scene-end, with Bassanio about to leave for Venice, the separate plots are nearly ready for their complete fusion in the great first scene of Act IV, the contest of the courtroom.

The antagonists there are Shylock and Portia; on another level, Venice and Belmont; in terms of theme, revenge and the love that is also mercy. In the theatre the two antagonists may seem grotesquely mismatched: the dark-visaged and thundering Shylock ("I stand here for law") and slight Portia ("my little body is aweary of this great world") in her legal disguise, making her brave appeal for mercy in treble tones. There is Antonio, probably bound, flanked by his jailers. The conclusion seems foregone: before Portia's entrance, the Duke, sworn to uphold strict law, asks Shylock, "How shalt thou hope for mercy, rend'ring none?", only to have his responsibility thrown back at him: "What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong?" --no wrong, of course, as the law defines wrong. The question goes unanswered, as does Shylock's scathing indictment of "Christian" slavery. He sits, the knife blade flashes, the appeal to mercy fails, and Balthasar-Portia then also as it seems must let the law take its course--"O noble judge! O excellent young man!" But "mercy" now takes up arms, will use the weapon of the adversary: the law. Shylock "shall have all justice, . . . have nothing but the penalty." He may use his knife, according to the terms of the contract, but he must shed no blood--cut, but take no ounce "less or more" than the exact pound specified in the bond. The taunts of Gratiano begin, echoing the language of Shylock earlier--"an upright judge, a learned judge!" The revenge is turned back upon the revenger. The penalty is harsh, but Shylock, trapped by the terms of his own bond, must be "content"--how he must pause before that word of surrender, how bitterly it must issue from his lips. He passes then forever from the stage--

> "I pray you give me leave to go from hence.
> I am not well."

Not even his memory remains to trouble the melodic serenity of the last act. That, of course, is the unhappy fate of Ogres in all the tales. They <u>must</u> not rise again. Poor Ogre!

While "the sounds of music / Creep in our ears" in the concluding act, when the lovers are reconciled after the playful business of the rings, and the news comes that, by "strange accident, three of Antonio's argosies "Are richly come to harbor suddenly," remember, in mercy, the poor Ogre.

6. Subject as Character

"Character" emerges from a play through speech and behavior or "action." Our narrative curiosity often focuses upon the question, why does a certain character behave as he does? The answer is motive, which relates character to plot. What makes the character tick is really what makes the plot tick. Thus in talking about character we often find ourselves talking about plot, and discussions of plot tend to turn into discussions of character.

Our "belief" in a character, our feeling that he is real, probably depends first upon the credibility of his motives and how they operate. It is, for instance, a proposition hardly to be questioned that when a person is mistreated he will probably be moved by an impulse to get even, to seek revenge, the ego's natural response to persecution whether trivial or great. The impulse may be repressed or it may take its course, and the greater the persecution the harder it will be to repress the revenge impulse. We feel all this to be probable and "true," accept it so unquestioningly that the repression of the revenge impulse, or "motive," on the occasion of a really enormous injury is harder to make credible than giving way to it: it will seem, no matter how much we would like it to be otherwise, "too good to be true." Our belief in a character begins with our belief in the credibility of his motive. We must believe in Shylock.

But credibility of motive, which relates character to plot, is alone probably not enough to make a character seem fully real. He must be fleshed out with other human traits. So he may be given thoughts and ideas, perhaps in the form of generalization, as in Antonio's "O what a goodly outside falsehood hath." He, or she, has moods: "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world." Wit "humanizes" some characters--Portia again: When the young German suitor "is best he is a little worse than a man, and when he is worst he is a little better than a beast." Characters are given mannerisms, "characteristic" ways of speaking and carrying themselves: Shylock's speeches, for instance, are marked by repetitions of words and phrases that seem unconscious and therefore believable, although of course they were calculated by the playwright. In such ways characters are made to seem real.

In a play, director and costume designer and actor also contribute much to the way in which we see and understand the dramatic characters. Thus we may speak of Sir Henry Irving's Shylock, or Walter Hampden's, or, more recently, Peter O'Toole's, almost as though not Shakespeare but the actor made him. Students should be encouraged to speculate both orally and in writing on how the characters should be costumed and played.

Character, then, comes to us through motive, speech, gesture, mannerisms, general behavior.

It will be convenient to consider the characters of The Merchant in three groups, arranged according to comparative difficulty of interpretation. First, those clearly minor, causing us little trouble: Solanio,

Salerio, Tubal, Launcelot Gobbo, and the Princes of Morocco and Arragon. Then, two who are really major but nevertheless quite clear in outline: Bassanio and Portia. Finally the problem cases: Gratiano, Antonio, and Shylock.

The minor characters in a play often are not fully fleshed out, although even in a brief appearance they may sometimes be remarkably vivid (the gravedigger in Hamlet, for instance). They are, however, useful; they serve necessary functions. Granville-Barker remarks that Solanio and Salerio are "cursed by actors as the two worst bores in the whole Shakespearian canon," and Salerio, poor fellow, seems to be aware of it:

> "I would have stayed till I had made you merry,
> If worthier friends had not prevented me."

They are nevertheless serviceable. They enrich and help to "realize" the context of the main action, "are there to paint Venice for us," Granville-Barker says, "the Venice of the magnificent young man." Such characters serve other purposes: they provide necessary information, serve as messenger boys and straight men, and sometimes their very colorlessness throws into sharp relief the full brilliance of the major characters. They may act as confidants, to whom a main character reveals himself as we eavesdrop: Tubal, for instance, and Nerissa. Or as comic relief, pure fun thrown in for good measure: the Gobbos. Launcelot has perhaps another and more important function: his desertion of Shylock anticipates in a kind of parody Jessica's more serious desertion only a little later. Shylock's progressive isolation is characteristic of the great tragic figures and helps to secure our sympathy: how alone he is as he passes from the stage into oblivion in Act IV. The clown's departure from the Shylock household also gives Jessica an opportunity to characterize it: his presence there "Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness."

The Prince of Morocco (played at Stratford in 1960 as coal-black and magnificently costumed, his stature hugely supporting his warrior's career) and the Prince of Arragon exist solely for the sake of the rituals of the caskets, yet they have their own persuasiveness. Morocco enters full of the pride of race and achievement, bringing with him intimations of Othello:

> "I tell thee, lady, this aspect of mine
> Hath feared the valiant. . .
> . . . I would not change this hue,
> Except to steal your thoughts, my gentle queen."

The very magnificence of his character leads straight to his decision. "'Twere damnation / To think so base a thought" as that the lead could "contain" Portia. Such is the general nobility of his bearing that Portia's curt dismissal of him after his defeat surely must seem unworthy of her:

> "A gentle riddance of him. Draw the curtains, go.
> Let all of his complexion choose me so.

Arragon a little later, reasoning his way toward his choice, seems on the right track, the one that leads finally to the decision of Bassanio: appearances are deceiving, only "the fool multitude" is taken in by them; and students may be asked whether they think his reasoning deserves the rebukes delivered by the contents of the silver casket ("The portrait of a blinking idiot, / Presenting me a schedule") and by Portia's "O these deliberate fools!" But we are not expected to waste sympathy on characters who exist primarily to further the fortunes of the hero and heroine of the play's romance.

Without Portia and the eloquent testimony of her love for him--

> "yet for you
> I would be trebled twenty times myself,
> A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,"

--testimony we surely are not expected to question, Bassanio could hardly stand very high in our estimation. He starts so <u>low</u>. His frailty is made all too plain in his first confidential dialogue with his loyal friend Antonio (I-1): he has been a parasite, he has lived upon Antonio's bounty as if, apparently, it was a privilege earned by his personal charm. A "Venetian, a scholar and a soldier," as Nerissa breathlessly refers to him, he has already visited Belmont and tried the charm on Portia, with , he is confident, quite satisfactory results ("Sometimes from her eyes / I did receive fair speechless messages"), which he reports to Antonio quite frankly as collateral for another load, since money is needed for the courtship gifts. The prologue (II. 140-152) to his proposition cooly calculates and disposes of the financial risk for Antonio: if Bassanio succeeds, payment of the old debt and no more leeching; if he fails, the gifts come back home with him and Antonio is no worse off than before. Shrewdness, not passion, supplies the dominant tone of these early speeches; even the praise of Portia, when he gets to it, has the ring of the rhetoric of calculation, single words and phrases are weighted with a disheartening double meaning: the lady is "<u>richly</u> <u>left</u>," she is "nothing <u>undervalued</u> to Cato's daughter," the wide world knows "of her <u>worth</u>," her hair is likened to the "<u>golden</u> fleece," and "<u>thrift</u>, "profit, will surely be the outcome of his suit. Keeping a hard eye on the main chance ("I will watch the aim," he has promised Antonio), his coaching of Gratiano in the second scene of Act II is the expression of a purely practical concern--behave yourself, he says, or I may "lose my hopes." His opportunism is set in instructive contrast with the selflessness of Antonio's inflexible loyalty--"I think" Solanio says of the latter, "he only loves the world for him." Bassanio in this phase is clearly a Romeo of the marketplace, a figure drawn in ironic defiance of the love conventions of the sonneteers.

The characterization, however, is justified in terms of the play's thematic content, in which love and the marketplace, daughters and ducats, are deliberately set in ironic juxtaposition (<u>somewhat</u> as they are later in the novels of Jane Austen); the Lover as Mercenary promotes the ruling intention. To understand this is also to give the triumph at Belmont,

when it comes, special significance and depth; it seems clear, that is, that it was the playwright's intention to make us see the magic of the place and the transparent honesty of Portia operating upon Bassanio as a process of redemption. The sincerity and honor of Portia's opening speech in III-2 prompts at its conclusion the image of torture in Bassanio's quick response:

"Let me choose,
For as I am, I live upon the rack."

Portia picks it up:

"Upon the rack, Bassanio? Then confess
What treason there is mingled with your love."

The sincerity of Bassanio's denial of "treason" is surely not now to be doubted (we learn later that he has already "confessed" that his only wealth is the gentle blood that runs in his veins); and his new self- knowledge gives special meaning to the terms in which he works his way toward the choice of the lead casket. There must be a note of secret self-contempt in the opening statement of his theme:

"So may the outward shows be least themselves;
The world is still deceived with ornament."

The hair-as- golden-fleece image of his earlier speech to Antonio is now recalled in his bitter reference to the "crisped snaky golden locks" of false beauty, identified with the death's-head, leading directly to the symbolic rejection of Morocco's golden casket, "hard food for Midas." The right choice is made, Bassanio's redemption is certified in the ritual of kiss and ring, the triumph of love and truth emphasized by the unregenerate Gratiano's thoughtless reminder of what, it seems, has been put aside; Antonio

will be glad of our success;
We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece.

But the triumph is negated immediately by the news of Antonio's failure and the threat of the old bond, the legacy of evil, the curse working itself out, the past not to be denied, all bringing to Bassanio a final agony of conscience, and forcing the final confession to Portia. Bassanio has been endowed with new moral strength; armed in it, he will return to Venice to do what he can. As it turns out, however, it is not he but Portia who comes to the rescue there. In spite of his redemption, Bassanio remains more than a little ineffectual, dependent always upon the strength of others--first Antonio, then Portia--for the rewards the playwright chose to bestow upon him.

Portia herself of course belongs to Shakespeare's great gallery of valiant and resourceful heroines, kin most obviously of Rosalind and Viola, who like her put on, significantly, the male disguise. She speaks so clearly for herself, her character presents itself with such integrity, that extensive commentary is hardly necessary.

There is, however, considerable psychological subtlety in the way in which the playwright combines in her person traits that seem contradictory but make her finally convincing. She has the unconscious authority of the great lady to the manner born, shown in the cool dignity with which she greets her two unwelcome suitors; yet housed also in her "little body" is an instinctive spirit of humility which speaks out almost curtly to Lorenzo: "This comes too near the praising of myself; / Therefore no more of it." Plagued by her swarm of suitors, in her early dialogue with Nerissa she disposes of them one by one with wit and shrewdness, clearly a woman of the world; yet she <u>is</u> young and she <u>feels</u> inexperienced, and so in all sincerity can confess herself to Bassanio "an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpractised," following that immediately however with the more obvious truth that "she is not bred so dull but she may learn." The maturity of judgment she brings to the affairs of the heart, the adult frankness with which she disposes of her responsibilities as heiress in her great speech to Bassanio after his triumph, separates her from the passionate girl Juliet, as her firm self-reliance sets her apart from Ophelia; and yet she <u>is</u> a girl, not <u>quite</u> a woman, and so may be allowed to forget for a moment the gravity of Antonio's plight in order to revel in the anticipated fun of getting herself up as a man, putting one over on Bassanio. Her spirit of fun, indeed, is irrepressible, it flashes out even in the courtroom, in her quick aside prompted by Bassanio's expressed willingness to sacrifice life, wife, and world if it would save his friend:

> "Your wife would give you little thanks for that
> If she were by to hear you make the offer,"

The mixture of qualities that make up her character is never more apparent than in this great scene: she contains within herself in brilliant synthesis the antithetical forces of the quality of mercy and the law: the moving eloquence of the most famous of the play's speeches gives way swiftly, when it <u>fails</u> to move, to the business-like development of her legal strategy, which she pushes ruthlessly to its farthest possible conclusion. When necessary she can be hard with the hard. Yet there is no gloating in her triumph, she simply does what must be done without wasting a word, and her treatment of her adversary is austerely impersonal. It would seem impossible to sentimentalize her. She is simply there.

> "You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
> Such as I am."

Such as she is: Portia.

Such as she is: agent of the revenge on the revenger; impersonal in court, but utterly ruthless; Shylock's implacable adversary, and admired for the success of her ruse.

So far our discussion of the playwright's intended meanings as they may be deduced from the text in terms of thematic content and dramatic narrative and characterization has encountered little difficulty. The playwright's control has seemed firm and the results consistent enough for confident interpretation. Ambiguity and some hints of uncertainty in the Shakespearian intention begin to appear, however, when we examine

closely the handling of our last four characters: Gratiano, Antonio, and Shylock. Turn first to the simplest of them: Gratiano.

He begins as a stock figure, appearing first ("Let me play the fool!") as a foil for the melancholy Antonio, memorable in the first act only for his one thrust of satire--"I am Sir Oracle, /And when I ope my lips, let no dog bark." The symmetry of the play's design and nothing else demands his presence in Belmont as Bassanio's companion and Nerissa's lover: "I must go with you to Belmont."--"Why then you must." In his role there he represents the bawdy side of love, a foil, again, for Bassanio's more spiritualized passion, a kind of lightweight Mercutio. He seems a dramatic convention and nothing more.

But then, in the courtroom scene, something shocking happens to him: the stock figure is torn apart by the insistent vindictiveness of his speeches when he sees that Portia has turned the tables on the Jew:

> "Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself!
> And yet, thy wealth being forfeit to the state,
> Thou has not left the value of the cord;
> Therefore thou must be hanged at the state's charge."

This frivolous fellow, harmless wag, has become a one-man lynch mob, deaf to any reason or thought of mercy:

> Portia: "What mercy can you render him, Antonio?"
> Gratiano: "A halter gratis! Nothing else, for God's sake."

He is out of control, yet no one tries to silence him, not even Portia, apparently deaf to the dreadful irony of that shrill cry for the rope for God's sake, preparing for his final coupling of christening font and gallows in the speech that hounds Shylock off the stage. It is a profoundly disturbing transformation.

Antonio, then. Like Gratiano, he also first appears as a recognizable type of the Elizabethan stage, representing the ideal of male friendship, generous to a fault, unswerving in loyalty. It is a theme that is played upon in many different ways in the Shakespearian canon, extending from its first (probably) appearance in the early Two Gentlemen of Verona to a disturbing final variation in The Winter's Tale, and in the conception of Antonio's character, his role as Ideal Friend seems primary. His apparently unmotivated melancholy has little significance beyond making an occasion for Solanio's small joke ("Then let us say you are sad /Because you are not merry") and as preparation for his stoical resignation before the threat of Shylock's knife in the court scene.*

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*It is possible that the Globe audiences, who knew their types, got some amusement out of the curious redistribution of traits between Antonio, the business man who is melancholy, and Bassanio, the lover who is so business-like.

Viewed in terms of the friendship theme, the device of the bond can be understood as a development growing naturally out of it: the friendship is tested in Antonio's generous acceptance of the risk. Fulfillment is reached in Act IV: ready to pay the penalty, he asks only of Bassanio that he "live still, and write mine epitaph." Later he extends it--perhaps not too subtly:

> "Tell Portia the process of Antonio's end,
> Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death:
> And when the tale is told, bid her be the judge
> Whether Bassanio had not once a love." *

This at least we know how to take.

But the development of this simple and conventional theme is given dark and unusual complication through its coupling with the revenge plot, in which the Jew is made the Agent of the Test of Love. In this, the Ideal Friend of the romance plot is identified as the historic Adversary of Shylock and his people. Shakespeare allows Shylock himself to make it emphatically explicit. Antonio

> "hath disgraced me and hind'red me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies--and what's his reason? I am a Jew.

This gives Antonio almost official status as persecutor, the summarizing sentence itself sounding like a program of action. Yet it is not quite that: Antonio's behavior toward the Jew is guided by no element of calculation, is instead instinctive, automatic, even casual, the result of a trait fixed deep in his character. He habitually uses with him the thou of contempt (in Act III, scene 3, Shylock, with Antonio now in his power, "thee's" and "thou's" him). He has defiled him with spittle, called him dog, and Shylock's passionate reminder of such insults prompts no attempt at defense--quite the contrary:

> "I am as like to call thee so again,
> To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too."

'Shy look you, how you storm!" Shylock ejaculates at the end of this contemptuous speech (an example of the dramatic text furnishing a stage direction to the actor). "Storm" suggests the later loud passion of Gratiano in the fourth act. It suggests that the melancholy, austere Antonio, has momentarily lost self-control.

Antonio, when Shylock's trap begins to close upon him, thinks he understands the motive of Shylock's persecution:

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* Cf. Hamlet to Horatio: "Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story."

"I oft delivered from his forfeitures
Many that have at times made moan to me.
Therefore he hates me."

Shylock himself in the first act has provided some support for Antonio's guess:

"I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more, for that in low simplicity
He hands out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice."

But the storming passion that Shylock has noted in Antonio surely is in excess of his cause--the dislike of usury. There is a deeper motive moving him. It is not personal, but cultural or social, and therefore unconscious, something Antonio has simply inherited along with his religion and his high social position. He is magnificently, appallingly, unaware of it. It lies somewhere beyond the boundaries of his moral imagination, and he has no sense that there may be any inconsistency between his spitting on the Jew in one situation and the courtliness of his manners in another--his sensitivity, for instance, to his position as "th' unhappy subject" of the quarrel about the rings in the fifth act. This aspect of Antonio's character must strike the modern imagination, at least, as a profound psychological observation by the playwright.

Finally, Shylock. We would not sentimentalize Portia; neither should we misread the Shylock given us by the text.

The role of usurer has been forced upon Shylock by history (although of course Shakespeare doesn't tell us that), but it is his role and he clearly has devoted his life to making the most of it. At the time of the composition of this play the stereotype of the Jew was fixed, and Shylock, like Marlowe's Jew of Malta, begins in the stereotype. Probably nothing in the play is more offensive to modern sensibilities than Jessica's theft of her father's ducats and jewels (imagine Desdemona doing such a thing!); but the curious pre-capitalist view that usury--interest--was a kind of theft made, in the minds of Shakespeare's audience, Shylock fair game, and the hysterical mixture of daughters and ducats in the speech reported by Solanio undoubtedly struck Globe-goers as brilliant comedy. But Shylock's character in its totality repeatedly shatters the stereotype. Elements are so mixed in him that a man emerges.

He is given a puritanical bent (the Puritan was a much more familiar figure in late Elizabethen England than the Jew, and at least as frequently subjected to satirical treatment). His is a somber home, enlivened only for a while by young Gobbo's presence; its windows, "ears," must be closed to the sound of the fife and drum of the frivolous masquers. Yet Shylock's bitter wit cuts across the puritan bias. He is a master of the art of ironic impersonation.

"Should I not say,
'Hath a dog money? is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?' Or

> Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key,
> With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness,
> Say this:
> 'Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last,
> You spurned me such a day, another time
> You called me dog; and for these courtesies
> I'll lend you thus much moneys'?"

His intelligence, schooled and sharpened by persecution, invigorates nearly all the scenes in which he appears; by comparison all his opponents except Portia seem dunces. His superiority is never clearer than when he delivers his thrusts at Christian hypocrisy:

> "You have among you many a purchased slave,
> Which like your asses and your dogs and mules
> You use in abject and in slavish parts,
> Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,
> 'Let them be free! marry them to your heirs!
> Why sweat they under burdens? Let their beds
> Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
> Be seasoned with such viands'? You will answer,
> 'The slaves are ours.' So do I answer you."

His intelligence serves his furious sense of injustice to shape for him (Shakespeare shapes it for him) the most forceful dramatic rhetoric of the play. The nervous variation of cadence in the above speech is characteristic of his style: the long sustained sweep of the opening sentence, unbroken by caesura, giving way to the staccato series,

> "'Let them be free! marry them to your heirs!
> Why sweat they under burdens'?",

varied again by the two long coordinate clauses,

> "'Let their beds
> Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
> Be seasoned with such viands'",

to arrive finally at the quick emphatic conclusion, "So do I answer you."

Is is a style firmly rooted in the image, the simple concrete noun and verb--"your asses and your dogs and mules" --"why sweat they under burdens?"--as the style of moral realism should be; and its concrete emphasis is reinforced by the devices of parallelism and repetition:

> "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses affections, passions?--fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

It is significant that his adversaries never try to meet such charges; significant that Shakespeare either keeps them mute on these occasions or lets them "storm" as Antonio does at the end of the first of Shylock's speeches we have quoted here.

We have referred briefly to the overwhelming persuasiveness of Shylock's revenge motive. He has been personally humiliated, spit upon; but there is a super-personal element in the fact that he has a keen sense that his humiliation is representative of the humiliation of a whole people. So it is that he reaches the climax of the great speech quoted immediately above, making his final point:

> "And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. . .
> The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it will go hard but I will better the instruction."

The plural pronouns are of the utmost significance.

By the time he has reached the moment of what he thinks will be the triumph of his "villainy," he seems to have abandoned all hope of morally enlightening his traditional enemies, of making them see his "reasons" and their guilt. So, in what may very well be his most brilliant speech, when he is brought as it were to an ultimate exasperation by his opponents' monumental obtuseness, he scorns any further attempt at explanation. It is, simply, his "humour" to exact the penalty. As some men without reason "cannot abide a gaping pig" or "a harmless necessary cat,"

> "So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
> More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
> I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
> A losing suit against him."

Antonio is of course resigned. Is there in his resignation a hint that some of the force of Shylock's long indictment has finally got through to him, that he has some faint sense of his own deep fault?

> "I am a tainted wether of the flock,
> Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit
> Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me."

Shakespeare's intention in these lines is not clear.

Our own sense, however, of Shylock's superb power and of the great injustices he has suffered, our sympathy with his "Tell not me of mercy," should not blind us to the fairly clear intention implicit in the triumph of Portia. It is that in "bettering the instruction" of the Christian lesson of revenge, Shylock himself has become monstrous. The knife is there. So we must conclude that in the end Professor Brents Stirling undoubtedly has the right of it. Shakespeare, he says,

"

> "seems to understand that false Christians have made Shylock what he is; at least he allows Shylock to say so, strenuously and effectively. Yet Shakespeare dramatizes the homely but evasive truth that no matter how 'understandable' hate and reprisal are, all who indulge them--even the persecuted--are equally guilty, and only the appearnace of mercy can break the chain of evil returned for evil. Hence forgiveness and mercy redeem a discordant world in the fourth act and open the way for concord and a world of music in the fifth."
>
> ("Pelican" edition of the play, p. 21)

We must try to think of this "mercy" as a benevolent magic. In the real world, however, enlightenment is probably more practical than magic; and no character in this play serves the cause of enlightenment so well as Shylock.

7. Form and Style: the Concluding Harmony

Music sounds forth repeatedly in the world of Shakespeare's plays, and its real harmony clearly has a symbolic function. Cassius is dangerous, Julius Caesar tells Antony; "he loves no plays / As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music." In our play, written several years earlier, the point had been made explicit by Lorenzo. After a reference to the power of the music of Orpheus to pacify even savage nature, he continues:

> "The man that hath no music in himself,
> Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
> Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils. . .
> Let no such man be trusted."

Music is a kind of secular grace ("the food of love" in the opening lines of Twelfth Night) standing for the power of regeneration, and metaphor of the ideal harmony civilized men long for in the human world.

As we have seen, in the first four acts of The Merchant the "storming" discord of persecution and revenge rhythmically alternates with the ritualistic harmony of Belmont. The Venetian interruptions are generally noisy--strident assaults upon the ear. Shylock's great speeches are anti-lyrical. His style, as we have noted, is characterized by a homely, often ugly, concreteness. He thinks in the idiom of the rude example. The art of generalization, which tends to muffle reality, is uncongenial to him. Even when he speaks in verse his passion constantly threatens to destroy the iambic regularity of the blank verse line; his blank verse moves like prose, and prose, one may feel, is his proper medium, the medium of "realism," of the marketplace, the stylistic antithesis of the world of Belmont.

It is given to Jessica and Lorenzo to strike the opening notes of the harmony of Act V. What we have seen and heard of these two earlier in the play has not been pleasant. Any attempt to make Jessica,

especially, palatable to the modern imagination is likely to fail. Say simply that she is such an unthinking combination of light-headedness and moral callousness that the former almost cancels out the latter. Lorenzo, like Bassanio (the parallel is obvious), is a Cinderella-man, but with the difference that he knows and gaily admits what his role has been--and the admission hardly ruffles the bland surface of the harmony of the dialogue:

> "In such a night
> Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,
> And with an unthrift love did run from Venice
> As far as Belmont."

"As far as Belmont" counters the clear double meaning of steal (the daughter came bearing ducats); "as far as Belmont," the world of fairy transformation, of the redemptive power, in the world of the play, of music and of moonlight.

Lorenzo and Jessica speak together an harmonious duet, a set piece in which they prove themselves apt collaborators. The passionate repetitiousness of Shylock now gives way to the formal pattern of repetition that the Elizabethan rhetoricians called anaphora, a series of speeches all beginning with the same phrase: "In such a night . . . In such a night. . . " Later, Shakespeare obligingly provides his audience with an exercise in anaphora's opposite number, epiphora:

> "If you did know to whom I gave the ring,
> If you did know for whom I gave the ring,
> And would conceive for what I gave the ring,
> And how unwillingly I left the ring,
> When naught would be accepted but the ring,
> You would abate the strength of your displeasure."

It is a verse of deliberate artifice, here designed (almost ironically it may seem) as a reminder and measure of how far we have moved from the ugly strife of Act IV. So it continues; and if, leaving the theater, moving out of its spell back into our own real world, we cannot quite believe in the redemption, if Shylock comes to life again and remains, as he should, to haunt and disturb us, we may still be grateful for the countering illusion: "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality."

8. Some Suggestions for the Classroom

The intention of the preceding sections has been to illuminate the play as a whole, to suggest to the teacher a few of the aims to be kept in mind in framing questions and guiding discussions in the classroom. They should not be taken as suggestions for a lecture or a series of lectures on the play. Students should be told, at least initially, only enough to facilitate intelligent reading, to understand what problems of interpretation they will encounter, and to stimulate interest.

Intelligent reading is of course the first step, and the teacher should take a positive role in preparing for it. Opening remarks should emphasize the fact that, unlike a novel or a book like Roughing It, The Merchant of Venice was written for the stage, to be both heard and seen. Since the classroom is not a theater, students will have to depend primarily on their own visual imaginations for the important effect of seeing. It is probable that the visual imagination is inactive in most reading; now it can be deliberately stimulated. How would your students cast the roles in this play? What physical attributes should an actor have in order to play Shylock, Antonio, the Prince of Morocco, successfully? How would your students handle grouping and movement on the stage?

Getting students to hear the play will probably be a more difficult task. Again, reading habits are such that much of the time we simply see the words on the page and they never leave the page to take on life in the ear. Reading aloud in class will seem an obvious way of resurrecting the dead word, but it may be only to mutilate it. When the student reader stumbles his way through the blank verse line, everyone suffers and the cause is lost. Oral reading must be coached. Select a scene, remark on its intention and major effects, assign parts, give them ten minutes for silent preparation, then begin. Interrupt (probably--tact is important) at the first serious blunder. In other words, this is a rehearsal. It is also an occasion for questions about meaning and emphasis. Keep at it. Something may begin to move the third time through. Use stools and music racks (now a convention) if convenient. Teachers with a talent for reading should not inhibit it, but even teachers must prepare themselves for it. Recordings, it goes without saying, are invaluable..

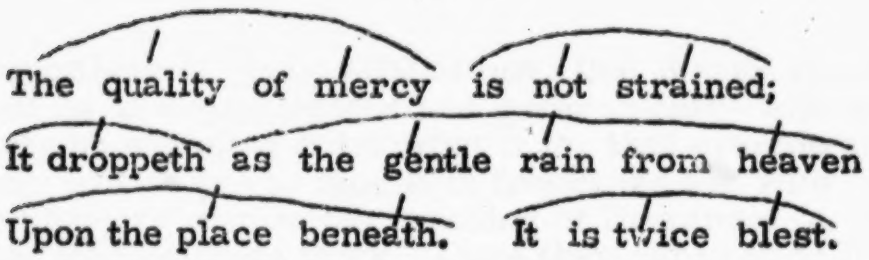
Rhythm, then. We have in the study of English verse rhythms a situation comparable to that in the study of grammar. Like the old grammatical categories, our traditional metrical systems were classical-based, and, although useful to poets as organizing devices, they simply do not describe the actual rhythmic situation in the English verse line. "Iambic pentameter" is accurate about only one aspect of the blank verse line: five times two does equal ten, and most (but by no means all) English blank verse lines do have ten syllables. Five accents? Are you sure? Five "feet"? Where are they? Take the opening lines of the famous speech:

> The quality of mercy is not strained;
> It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
> Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest.

Two things characterize these rhythms: the phrasal units--if loosely defined, two in each line; and syllabic emphasis--in this case not five but four in each line. Two and four, then, not five and ten (scansion by Woolworth's). Teachers may invent their own scansion symbols, so long as they do not come out like this:

The qua | li tee | of mer | cy is | not strained

Whatever that is, it is neither English nor poetry. Something like this is at least crudely descriptive and may thus suggest something to the young reader:



Some students in the class may have made the summer pilgrimage to Ashland, where the productions are staged in physical circumstances approximating those of the Elizabethan theater, a description of which is provided in the introduction to our edition. Ashland reports and discussions of the introductory material should be encouraged. It should be made clear that our scene and act divisions are useful to the reader as a means of ready reference but are misleading from the point of view of pace and movement. "The Curtain Falls" has no relevance to Shakespearian production: there was no curtain in our sense, nor is there one now in most productions. The play flows in continuous movement as in cinema, and the unbroken shifts from Venice to Belmont and back again are pointed in dramatic effect. Note the shock of the quick transition from II-9 to III-1:

"Bassanio, Lord Love, if thy will it be!"

. . . .

"Now what news on the Rialto?"

Some of the material in our sections 3 ("What Is It?") and 4 ("Thematic Structure") may also be useful in preparing students for intelligent reading. They need to be told in advance, probably, how to take the play--a preparation of attitude; and a few clear statements about the thematic structure can serve as guideposts for the reading journey through it.

However, of the several aspects of the play reviewed here, student interest at this grade level will probably gravitate most naturally to the characters. Shylock should not be allowed to monopolize attention, but he is obviously the play's most compelling figure and should be squarely faced. Moral issues are deeply woven into all great literary works, and young readers are often ardent moralists; but moral thinking, like all other kinds of thinking, needs guidance and discipline.

This play, as we suggested in section 2, was selected in part because of (certainly not in spite of) the fact that the issue of persecution is central to it. The callous treatment of the Jew by the other characters in the play (but not by Shakespeare) is a chilling dramatic record of moral blindness, of the cruel operation of irrational prejudice (rational prejudice of course is a confusion in terms). Although the circumstances of the age furnished Shakespeare with a particular prejudice and a particular victim in a particular time and place, students should be led to see that the treatment of Shylock and his adversaries is really a probing study of the psychology of prejudice in all times and all places, including our own; that it is always a sinister foe of the concept of our common humanity and is always based on false myths--myths about another man's religion, nation, clan, skin pigmentation, etc.; that it may single out

individuals regardless of group affiliations, that it may appear on playgrounds as well as in organizations and governments; and that it can be removed only be exposing it for what it is, that evasion simply encourages it, that nothing will do but to face it in frankness and with reason. Reason. Our ultimate aim in the teaching of literature is, after all, simply to insist that students think. Once they get used to it, they may even find that they enjoy it. It doesn't come naturally, it is an acquired taste. Cultivating it is what schoolrooms are for.

9. Postscript on Shakespeare's English

It was said at the start that the work of Shakespeare was a "language experiment." Language is the basic medium of the play and may at first present occasional difficulties. The teacher and student guides for the study of Shakespeare's English can be used in different ways, but at least some of the information they provide should probably be introduced early in the study of The Merchant. The general historical material and the sections on vocabulary in "IV" should probably be discussed before the actual reading begins. The detailed exercises may be used concurrently with the study of the play as play or may be studied as a more or less independent topic when the "literary" work has been completed. Language and literature are functionally inseparable, but the study of language is exciting and valuable in its own right.